VIEWS AND REVIEWS: FIRST SERIES, BY HAVELOCK ELLIS

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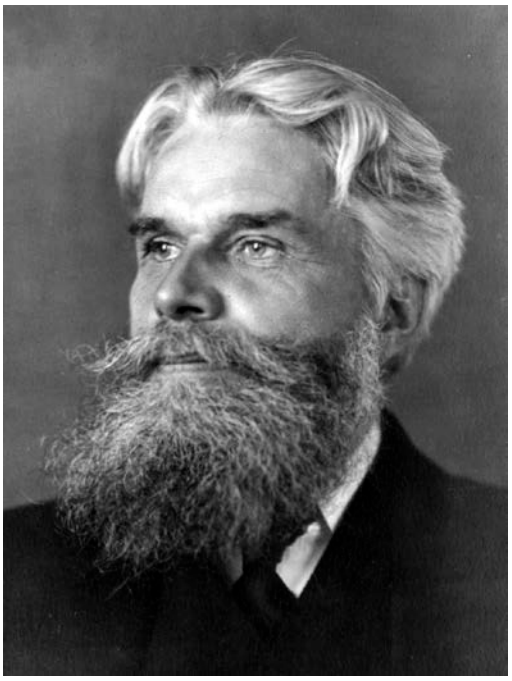

Havelock Ellis in 1913

THIRTY-FOUR ESSAYS AND ARTICLES are assembled in this book: the earliest was written in 1884, the latest in 1919. They are here reprinted together in chronological order because they failed to fit into their author's other books; the result is a loose collection of *obiter scripta* on the subjects to whose study Mr Ellis devoted his life, psychology, social hygiene, literary criticism, sociology, even political theory. These essays are of very unequal value; they are most easily classifiable into essays written because Mr Ellis wished to state original, or, at any rate, strongly held, opinions on some

subject, or because some experience, whether his own or that of others, seemed to him sufficiently valuable to deserve description and analysis – these are the genuine essays, those whose value rests in themselves. On the other side will be found short notices, reviews, occasional articles written out of sheer conscientiousness and sense of social duty, whenever, for example, a book appeared to which it was necessary to call attention in the interest of general progress and enlightenment. These latter are almost entirely educational propaganda, very lucid and vigorous, but with obvious limitations considered as literature.

An instance will illustrate this: in the beginning of this century Auguste Forel wrote a book of considerable importance on the psychology of sex which caused great interest when it appeared, and is to this day widely read in French, German and Slavonic countries. Mr Ellis, who was at all times more alive to literary and scientific events abroad than the majority of English men of letters, proceeded [296] to bring this book to public notice by means of a brief review which, in all probability, performed its purpose quite adequately. The review is a very careful and intelligent piece of work, but it is altogether too slight and casual to deserve formal resurrection after thirty years.

Again, it was obviously a considerable public service to have reminded the British public in 1916 that even among conservative Germans there were some who openly condemned the political doctrines of Treitschke and Bismarck, and adopted a humaner ideal. But the analysis of the political doctrines concerned is not (and did not, for its purpose, need to be) sufficiently elaborate and penetrating to justify this definite bid for a longer life. More than half of the essays in this book are of this character, relevant and needed in their time, but of small significance outside their context. Our complaint is that, scattered as they are, owing to chronological exigencies, in loose clumps round the more considerable essays, they form a dense archipelago which one is forced to navigate at length before one finds what one seeks. This last turns out to be so interesting that one's annoyance largely disappears; but the approach is made unnecessarily wearying.

The most arresting are the literary essays, notably those on 'The Present Position in English Criticism' (written in 1885), on Browning and on Blasco Ibañez, and these are more valuable for the light they throw on the mind of their author than for their

critical powers. Mr Ellis is a very remarkable figure both as a man and as a writer, especially remarkable because in essence he does not belong to the time or culture in which his youth and middle age were spent, but to a period earlier by at least half a century, and a freer, more southern civilisation. Anyone who has read in him at all will know how greatly he is fascinated by what Jules de Gaultier called *le Bovarysme*, the theory, to put it very crudely, that frequently it happens that a man, while naturally endowed with one type of mental and physical constitution, misjudges his own nature and creates fictions about himself and the outer world, by which he strives to live. His life is shaped by the permanent conflict between the two hostile forces, one natural, the other artificial. This theory fascinates Ellis wherever any form of it is propounded, in Nietzsche, in Gaultier, in Vaihinger – we are reminded of it by an essay devoted to it in this book. It may be interesting to apply the theory to Mr Ellis himself and survey the result.

One discovers in the first place that fundamentally he belongs to a much simpler and bolder generation than that into which he was [297] born – to that of the great social theorists and Romantics in Germany and Italy during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. He possesses their vigour, their unselfconsciousness, their breadth of style in life and art, their passionate nobility of temper, even their unquestioning belief in the perfectibility of mankind by the development and harmonisation of thought and feeling, in the attainment of individual liberty through increased enlightenment in public administration; and together with this the inevitable tendency towards vagueness and the oversimplification of issues, a tendency to find the answers to complex social and ethical questions in unwavering faith in the ideas of human freedom and the infinite value of the individual.

This is the 'natural' substratum, the characteristic quality of Mr Ellis which distinguishes him from those of his more anaemic contemporaries who plead for the same things: the breadth, tranquillity and full-bloodedness of his style contrasts sharply with their shrillness and restlessness.

This fundamental romanticism explains his enthusiasm for such picturesque mediocrities as J. A. Symonds or Blasco Ibañez, and his preference for the writings of the former to those of Pater,

whom he admires after a fashion, but obviously finds so antipathetic that he can observe of his critical theory that 'it was ingenious and almost scientific […] and had not Mr Pater seemed to swoon by the way over the subtle perfumes he had evoked, he might, one thinks, have gone far'. His dislike of Arnold's weary didacticism, or of the concept of Life Force glorified in the metaphysics of Shaw and Wells, springs from the same source. His formal reason for condemning it is that Wellsian evolutionism can be shown to be unscientific; the deeper reason, only half revealed, is that Evolution is something too grey and impersonal to be the object of a free man's worship.

If this is the 'natural' substratum, then the 'fictional', superimposed element in the dialectic which this theory demands is the general temper of the late nineteenth century in which he was educated. His intellectual home, the region in which his thought moves most freely and familiarly, is the group of French novelists and critics, the Goncourts, Remy de Courmont, Zola, Huysmans, Gaultier. The sensitiveness and acuteness of his judgements, his rare feeling for words and rhythms, his scientific temper, his absorbed interest in persons, all to be found in his most technical works, in *Psychology of Sex* and *A Study of British Genius*, shows the strength of their influence. [298] Grafted on the more elemental, primitive substratum, it has produced a style of singular charm, free from both affectation and crudity, which, in this book, is best exemplified in the beautiful essay on 'The Men of Cornwall', and in the essays devoted to the art of biography, which defend the right of the individual to be treated as an individual, and not as a random factor in an impersonal historical process.

Interest in, and the active defence of, the individual is at present moment an obsolescent activity: this book is for the most part concerned with the individual, and the individual alone; this in itself commands one's sympathy and admiration for this isolated and heroic representative of an almost forgotten and, on the whole, more interesting and attractive age.

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